ISSN 2073-5111(Print)

nature net
naturekenya.org
June 2020

PHOTO: www.birdingbeijing.com

Celebrating Birds in times of pandemic

BY ESTHER WANGARI

The nonstop return flight of a Common Cuckoo from Kenya to Bangladesh on its way home to Mongolia is one of the highlights of this year's World Migratory Bird Day. The cuckoo departed from Kenya on April 29, passed through Somalia and flew 6,300 kilometers in six and a half days to arrive in Bangladesh on May 6. This shows both the amazing abilities of migratory birds and the effectiveness of technology in helping ornithologists to understand migration patterns.

The cuckoo was named Onon when together with three other Common Cuckoos was fitted with a transmitter in June 2019 by the Mongolia Cuckoo Project. Since then, the project has been giving updates through their website <www.birdingbeijing.com>

The Common Cuckoo left Mongolia in 2019 for Zambia, its wintering grounds. Records of his return journey show that he arrived in Kenya from Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and spent three days in the upper Tana River. The next time his movement was picked up was the day he departed from the north eastern part of the country.

Onon flew over Somalia, the Indian Ocean and most of India. From Bangladesh, Onon moved to northeastern India and then to China. By mid-May, the transmitter placed him near Wuhan in Hubei Province in China. On May 27, Onon finally arrived "home" near Khurkh Bird Ringing Station in northern Mongolia where he had been fitted with the transmitter in June 2019. He had made a round trip of about 26,000 km, passing through 16 countries and two continents

Onon is not the only Cuckoo that made headlines. Carlton II, another tagged Common Cuckoo, flew 7,500 kilometers from Ivory Coast to England in seven days. The Daily Mail reported that: "Cuckoos normally take two or three weeks to reach the United Kingdom after starting their journeys in the western Africa country of Gabon before stopping in the Ivory Coast. The three-year-old bird becomes the fastest tagged bird to make the trip from Africa to England."

Since getting tagged by the British Trust for Ornithology in 2018, Carlton has flown over 35,000 Kilometers on his migration between Africa and England.

The National Audubon Society – BirdLife in the U.S. – estimates that at least 4,000 species of birds in the world are regular migrants. This represents about 40 per cent of the world's bird population. This year's World Migratory Bird Day theme – Birds Connect Our World – was brought to life by the epic journey of these two cuckoos. By tracking their movement and relaying information about their migratory routes, birders were able use technology to appreciate the global linkage created by a single migratory bird. Onon's trip to and fro covered 26,000 kilometres and he crossed through 27 borders connecting 16 different countries at a time when the movement of humans within nations has been grounded to a halt following the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus Covid-19.

Some of the widely known hazards faced by migratory birds include high winds, ferocious hailstorms, lengthy sea crossing, thunderstorms and the trapping and killing for their meat. Habitat loss through the conversion of their feeding habitats to human settlement and ill placed infrastructure are some of the emerging bird migration barriers. The online platform created by the two projects offered an opportunity to gather information about the change of routes and the duration of rest taken by the migratory birds. The information will be used to coordinate efforts towards the conservation of some of the ecosystems which are important for the survival of these migratory birds.

World Migratory Bird Day and eBird Global Big Day Round-up

World Migratory Bird Day – a celebration of the wonder of bird migration – coincided with the eBird Global Big Day on May 9, 2020. The eBird Global Big Day is a bird sighting event where birders all over the world observe birds on the same day and submit their observations on the eBird website. Birders from all countries of the world can take part; it's the peak of bird migration in the northern countries, while tropical countries have a wider diversity of birds.

This year, despite most of the world being on lockdown, more than 51,000 people took part in the Big Day and submitted checklists. The top 10 countries were all in the Americas, where eBird is well established. Kenya took the leading position in Africa and emerged 11th in the world, after 85 groups or individuals all over the country recorded 613 bird species.

Mt. Kenya Biodiversity Conservation Group (Mt. Kebio) marked World Migratory Bird Day by holding a birdwatch along a three-kilometer stretch in Burguret. Despite a low turnout, a total of 60 different bird species were sighted.

Members of the South Nandi Biodiversity Conservation Group (SONABIC) marked the day by holding a birdwatch in Chepkong'ony area in the South Nandi Forest. A total of 60 bird species were recorded by the 14 members who participated.

Friends of Kinangop Plateau organized a birdwatch and a bird talk about bird migration at the Friends of Kinangop Plateau Resource Centre. The 22 participants were divided into four groups to allow them to cover the different habitats – grasslands and water bodies -which characterize Kinangop area. A total of 118 bird species were recorded.

Down at the Coast, members of the Mida Creek Conservation and Awareness Group (pictured below) celebrated World Migratory Bird Day with a birdwatch along the shores of the Indian Ocean and areas adjacent to the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest. A total of 54 bird species were sighted among them Mangrove Kingfisher (an intra-African migrant), Yellow-throated Longclaw and Collared Palm Thrush.

PHOTO: JUMA BADI

Conservation in the new normal

Our routines are changing as our lives are affected by the changes brought by Covid-19. The Kenya Government has given directives to help reduce the spread and the health care system has been able to cope. We are getting used to wearing masks and keeping some physical distance apart. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has indicated Covid-19 will not just go away.

PHOTO: SAMSON KIMUTAI

Members of the South Nandi Biodiversity Conservation Group (SONABIC) take part in a bird watching exercise at Chepkong'ony area in South Nandi Forest to mark the World Migratory Bird Day.

Nature Kenya is abiding by the government directives. A new normal is emerging. Some activities remain postponed, others that had been postponed may be possible within new approaches, while other work continues as follows:

1. Members will receive an electronic version of the Nature Net until further notice.
2. Some museums and sites are expected to re-open in June 2020. All visitors will observe new access protocols including sanitatizing and wearing masks.
3. The Wednesday Morning Birdwalks are planning to resume on 1st July 2020, with some changes to the format. Participants to meet at the venue. No pooled transport. All to wear masks and observe social distancing. Updates will be published in the July Nature Net.
4. Sunday bird walks and other field trips and talks are still suspended until further notice. You will be informed as soon as they resume.
5. The Membership office and shop is closed until further notice. Membership recruitment and renewal however continues. Visit http://naturekenya.org/support/membership/ and use cashless payment options such as M-Pesa or credit/debit cards. Your membership cards will be processed and mailed to you. As long as the main office remains open part of the time, members may also buy Arabuko-Sokoke honey. Pay by M-pesa and arrange to collect the honey. Ring the bell at the entrance of the office behind the galleries.
6. The 110th Annual General Meeting remains postponed until further notice.
7. The *'Lungs for Kenya'* Charity Golf Tournament 2020 is re-scheduled for Friday, October 2nd, 2020 at the Karen Country Club.

Technical staff at the Nature Kenya office and in the field continue to optionally work from home. Support staff are on paid leave. The Nature Kenya conservation programme is spread across the country with Site Support Groups (SSGs) at 26 sites and on-site conservation projects at 8 sites. This means that even when Nairobi based staff are locked inside Nairobi Metropolitan region, significant conservation actions can still be implemented at site level despite the Covid-19 disruptions:

RESTORATION

In May 2020, 108,200 indigenous trees were planted by Community Forest Associations (CFAs) in Mt. Kenya (at Gatare (5,200), Wanjerere (10,000), Njukiiri (10,000), Chehe (10,000), Irangi (10,000), Chuka (11,000), Ngare Ndare (10,000), Ontulili (10,000) and Kimondi in South Nandi (32,000). Tree planting by Site Support Groups at other sites included: Yala swamp 9,530, Taita 1,053, and 3,000 mangrove trees planted at Maziwa and Saba Saba at the coast. In the lower River Yala riparian areas and people's farms, 28,032 tree seedlings were planted. Nature Kenya ensures that trees that are planted survive by removing weeds and replanting those that die. In May, **20,572 indigenous trees** were planted to replace the dead seedlings planted in October and November 2019 (Njukiiri 4,000, Irangi 6,222, Ontulili 5,350 and Lower Imenti 5,000). Weeding was done around **37,538 indigenous trees** planted at Irangi 33,778 and Ontulili 3,760.

SAVING SPECIES

In May, 65 Vulture Volunteers continued to liaise with four Vulture Liaison Officers to carry out surveillance for wildlife poisoning in Kajiado and Narok. No poisoning incident was reported in May, but three cases of electrocution incidents were reported (1 flamingo, 1 Kori Bustard and 1 giraffe!). Nature Kenya supported partners (Mara Predator Conservation Program) to construct five predator-proof *bomas* in Masai Mara to reduce incidents of livestock attacks by wildlife as a precursor for reducing poisoning. IBA detailed monitoring by trained local monitors in Dakatcha Woodland recorded 100 Clarkes Weaver's in Gandi Wetland while the Taita Apalis was monitored in Taita Hills (Chawia, Iyale, Ndiwenyi and Msidunyi). Common Bird Monitoring was carried out in Arabuko-Sokoke Forest along ten transects. The IBAs Status and Trends monitoring sheets for the year 2019 are being analysed.

POLICY AND ADVOCACY

Nature Kenya continued to engage with key sectors of the economy to promote ecological sustainability especially by providing input into policy processes: National report to the Convention on Biological Diversity; Memoranda on national government estimates of revenue and expenditure 2020/2021 with focus on Tana River County; Extended Producer Responsibility regulations 2020; Kenya Coffee Roadmap and Tea industry Regulations; and the Tana Delta green industrial park feasibility study. Nature Kenya was part of National planning for key world environmental days including World Environment Day and World Day to Combat Desertification.

LOCAL EMPOWERMENT

Assessed the impact of Covid-19 to site conservation efforts of 29 Site Support Groups (at 26 sites) and provided financial resources from Society reserves and projects to enable Site Support Groups to respond to increased threats to species and sites. Supported actions include: IBA monitoring, forest patrols, awareness creation through both mainstream and social media and maintenance of income generating activities (IGAs). To raise awareness, the World Migratory Bird Day, World Bee Day and International Day of Biological Diversity were successfully marked by Site Support Groups in Mt. Kenya, South Nandi Forest, Kinangop Grasslands, Taita Hills,North Nandi and Mida Creek. The Bunyala SSG under the umbrella of Yala SSG created awareness about the Yala Swamp Land Use Plan (LUP), Community Conserved Areas and general conservation of Yala Swamp through local radio station Bulala FM.

Nature Kenya field staff, in collaboration with the Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group and Tana Delta Conservation Network, are conducting a flood impact assessment on biodiversity and livelihoods within the Yala and Tana deltas wetland ecosystems. Floods are a natural part of the deltas' ecology, but this year's heavy floods are wreaking havoc in Bunyala and Budalangi in Busia county, in Yala in

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An Extraordinary Window into the Secretive Life of Parasitic Weaver

BY BRIAN FINCH

In birding you have no idea of what magical event is going to present itself when you get up in the morning. Rupert Watson, James Robertson, Abigail Church and myself had invited Sidney Shema for a morning birding experience on Mukoma Estate (Lang'ata).

Visiting a friend's vlei, we found a young Parasitic Weaver. As a new bird for Mukoma, that was exciting in itself. Nearby were a family of Stout Cisticolas, two adults with fledged young. To our amazement, the adults then proceeded to feed the now begging Parasitic Weaver.

An adult came back with a large Stick Insect, more than $^{2}/_{3}$ the length of the bird's body. With flailing legs, this was an unmanageable, far too large meal for the young bird. But what happened next floored us…all captured on video.

This Stick Insect was much larger than the usual insect prey that a Stout Cisticola would have fed to its real offspring, now watching the proceedings. The adult passed the impossible-to-swallow prey to the Parasitic Weaver whose stronger bill was able to secure it firmly.

As the young Parasitic Weaver held the Stick Insect, making no attempt to eat it, the Cisticola broke off all legs from their bases and discarded them. Head and antennae also removed whilst the young bird patiently held the insect without moving during the operation.

The legless, headless Stick Insect, reduced to just the "stem", was taken back and positioned pointing towards the beak, and the young adoptee seized it with the end down its throat and proceeded in a few gulps to swallow the entire thing.

None of us had ever seen this before. It opens up a few questions about relationships and birds' instincts. An unparasitised Stout Cisticola with a normal brood, would be programmed to tackle small insects and disregard anything too large for them. But the parasitised family's adults learnt that the large billed but not so very much larger Parasitic Weaver could handle larger food items.

The organised way young and adult worked together in trimming the oversized prey was extraordinary. The young bird not trying to consume the prey but obediently holding it and not complaining when it was taken away again… is remarkable and looked like a regular well practiced event.

On top of this came another revelation. The bird was found after I had heard it call and announced that I was sure I had heard a Parasitic Weaver giving flight calls, which sounded like it went over there. Then Sidney found it sitting on a low open bush. Knowledge of the call is a great advantage, but this is not the issue. This juvenile dependent bird called identically to the adults of its species, yet the only time it has ever had of the chance of hearing another Parasitic Weaver call is when it was an egg in the oviduct! Never in its short life had it met up with another of its kind from which it could have learnt the call it was going to give for the rest of its life.

This is really food for thought, and I think undeniably proves that calls of some birds are inherited not taught!

To see a video of this interaction, visit: https://www.shotsbyshema.com/birding-from-home-parasitic-weaver-and-its-host/

Eclipses and Solstice

BY FLEUR NG'WENO

The comets seem to have faded. This month, however, we can look forward to a lunar and a solar eclipse – although they will not be very striking in Kenya.

On June 5th, from about 9 pm to midnight, the full moon will pass through the faint outer shadow of the earth. The moon may seem a little less bright than usual, but the difference is very subtle.

On Sunday 21 June, the new moon (with its sunlit side facing away from Earth), will pass directly between the sun and the Earth. Because the moon will be at the far end of its orbit – a little further from Earth than usual – it will not cover the sun completely. A brilliant rim of sunlight will remain around the dark moon, forming an **annular eclipse.**

The path of the annular eclipse passes a little to the north of Kenya, so here we will see a **partial solar eclipse.** It begins shortly after sunrise on June 21, and ends about 9 am. It's dangerous to look at the sun, even during an eclipse. So take a pin and make a pinhole in a piece of cardboard or paper. This is a "pinhole camera".

Hold the paper near a wall – or another piece of paper – so that the sun shines through the hole onto the wall or other paper. The spot of light will show the dark moon slowly taking a "bite" from the disc of light. After about 8 am, the dark "bite" will get smaller.

And if it's our usual cloudy June morning until 9 am, we may not see anything at all!

Planets June '20

Little Mercury shines brightly above the sunset in early June. Then it slowly sinks towards the western horizon. The slender crescent moon is near Mercury on June 22.

Brilliant Venus passes between the Earth and the sun, and reappears in the sunrise in the second week of June. Venus seems to be close to the bright, reddish star Aldebaran. The waning crescent moon is near Venus on June 19.

Bright Jupiter rises in the east during the evening, and is in the sky for the rest of the night, followed by golden Saturn. Reddish Mars is high in the east at dawn. The waning moon is near Jupiter and Saturn on June 9 and near Mars on the 13th.

June Stars

The constellation Leo the Lion is high in the west. You can imagine the bright star Regulus as the heart of the lion. From Regulus, a line of stars forms a sickle shape, like the head and mane of a lion.

Arcturus, a sparkling orange star, is high in the north. The blue-white star Spica is almost overhead. The moon is near Regulus on June 25 and near Spica on the 29th.

Low in the northwest is the constellation of the Plough or Big Dipper. Can you see this constellation as a dipper – a deep, long-handled spoon for scooping up water?

In the south, the beautiful constellation of the Southern Cross stands upright. It tilts towards the west during the evening. Two very bright stars, Alpha and Beta Centauri, seem to point toward the Southern Cross.

Moon '20 June

Full moon, June 5. Last quarter (half lit at dawn), June 13. New moon and solar eclipse, June 21. First quarter (half lit at sunset) June 28.

June sun

June 20 is the solstice, when the North Pole is most tilted towards the sun. Here on the equator, from mid March to mid September we see the sun traveling across the northern part of the sky during the day.

Websites

EarthSky: http://earthsky.org/ Subscribe to their daily e-mail newsletter!

Sky and Telescope: http://www.skyandtelescope.com/ subscribe to their weekly e-mail newsletter

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Siaya County and in the Tana Delta where homes, villages and farms have been submerged by the floodwaters. In Yala, 17 fishponds were assessed for restocking with the next crop of fingerlings; construction of a poultry keeping unit with a capacity of 400 chickens is in progress in Gem; construction of a papyrus products bulking center and market outlet is ongoing in Siaya town; and 250 farmers were supported to carry out climate smart agriculture and conservation farming. In Tana Delta, construction of a community livelihoods enterprise demonstration and model centre is nearly completed.

MOVING FORWARD

Nature Kenya will continue to update you on further developments. Threats remain to species and habitats, and conservation work must go on. Please continue to support Nature Kenya, and to observe and enjoy nature from wherever you are. For any clarification or to report your observation on species and sites, kindly contact us through e-mail: **office@naturekenya.org** or telephone: **020 3537568, 0780 149200, 0751 624312, 0771 343138**

Dr. Paul Matiku,
Executive Director, Nature Kenya – the East Africa Natural History Society

Birding Updates

The Wednesday Morning Birdwalks, monthly Sunday Birdwatch and Mombasa birdwalks are still temporarily suspended. The Wednesday Morning Birdwalks may restart in July, with a few changes: Meeting each week at a different venue within Nairobi Metropolitan Area, and no pooled transport. Subject to change at short notice if circumstances require.

We hope you find opportunities to go birding on your own or with local groups. If you go out birding, please submit lists of the birds that you see/hear to the Kenya Bird Map project to help document the distribution of Kenya's birds <http://kenyamap.adu.org.za/> If you have questions, write to < kenyabirdmap@naturekenya.org>

To stay in touch and be updated with the birding scene in Kenya, sign in to the new Kenyabirdsnet platform of Google Groups at:

https://groups.google.com/d/forum/kenyabirdsnet

After signing in you will be able to post your records through the following email address:

kenyabirdsnet@googlegroups.com

Some online resources about birds and birding are:

- BirdLife International < http://www.birdlife.org>
- The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology Bird Academy <https://academy.allaboutbirds.org> Many of their resources are free to use.
- Wings Over Kenya Facebook page
- Ndege Wetu (14-part blog series on the birds of Kenya) <http://www.shotsbyshema.com/category/ndege-wetu/)

JOURNAL OF EAST AFRICAN NATURAL HISTORY

A new issue is now available online at https://www.bioone.org/journals/journal-of-east-african-natural-history/volume-108/issue-2

The following papers are now available from BioOne (http://www.bioone.org/toc/eanh/current) or African Journals Online (https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jeanh)

Mike Bingham: In Memoriam4 September 1936–4 January 2019
Benny Bytebier
https://www.bioone.org/journals/journal-of-east-african-natural-history/volume-108/issue-2/028.108.0201/Mike-Bingham-In-Memoriam4-September-19364-January-2019/10.2982/028.108.0201.full

Avifaunal Biodiversity in Peril: Pre- and Post-Vegetation Clearance Survey of Avifauna in a Fragmented Thicket in an Urban Landscape, Dar Es Salaam City, Tanzania
Chacha Werema, Ramadhani B.M. Senzota & Nassoro Mohamed
https://www.bioone.org/journals/journal-of-east-african-natural-history/volume-108/issue-2/028.108.0202/Avifaunal-Biodiversity-in-Peril--Pre--and-Post-Vegetation/10.2982/028.108.0202.full

The Reptiles of Mkomazi National Park, Tanzania an Updated Checklist with Some Aspects of Biogeography
Glory W. Summay, Kevin E. Lyakurwa, John V. Lyakurwa, Chacha Werema, Tito J. Lanoy & Raymond E. Okick
https://www.bioone.org/journals/journal-of-east-african-natural-history/volume-108/issue-2/028.108.0203/The-Reptiles-of-Mkomazi-National-Park-Tanzania-an-Updated-Checklist/10.2982/028.108.0203.full

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For details on associated groups such as Youth Committee, Succulenta, and Friends of Nairobi Arboretum, City Park or Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, contact office@naturekenya.org